

First record of Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* for St. Helena, South Atlantic

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Première mention du Crabier chevelu *Ardeola ralloides* pour l'île de Sainte-Hélène, Atlantique Sud.

Le premier Crabier chevelu *Ardeola ralloides* pour Sainte-Hélène a été observé et photographié le 9 août 2012, et à plusieurs reprises ensuite jusqu'en décembre 2012. Sainte-Hélène se trouve à environ 1.900 km à l'ouest de la côte africaine en Namibie et en Afrique du Sud, où l'espèce niche. Des occasionnels ont précédemment été observés sur d'autres îles Atlantiques, y compris l'Île de l'Ascension, les Îles Canaries et du Cap-Vert, Madère et les Açores.

On 9 August 2012, GE noticed a small, hunched heron in marshy cattle pasture dominated by tall grasses and yam plants in the lower Fisher's Valley, on the east side of St. Helena. It was easily identified as a Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*. Several photographs were taken on this and the next day (Figs. 1–2). The striped head, neck and mantle were characteristic, as were the biscuit-brown wings and back, and white primaries and secondaries, which were evident only in flight. There was some yellow on the long pointed bill and the lores. The eyes and legs were also yellow. The bird was noted over the next four months, until mid-December 2012, always in the same general area of marshy land at the bottom of the valley, and is the first record on St. Helena.

The bird was first observed in the flatter middle section of Fisher's Valley (15°57.6'6.98"S 05°40'31.12"W) below Bradley's, also known as the 'Government Garage'. The valley bottom has been fenced for many years, providing a long narrow strip of pasture in the otherwise arid surroundings of the Prosperous Bay plain in the semi-desert fringe of the island. The vegetation is dominated by grasses and yam *Colocasia esculenta* in the wet valley floor. This results in a long thin strip of 'riverine' vegetation suitable for the species, and probably the most extensive on the whole island. Rarely more than 5 m wide, upstream it has been modified for market gardening, while downstream there are a series of steep rocky waterfalls in the lower gorge before the stream flows into the sea at Prosperous Bay. On most occasions the bird was seen in the



Figure 1. Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* holding the exotic frog *Rana greyii*, the only amphibian on the island, in its bill, Fisher's Valley, St. Helena, August 2012 (Steffen Oppel)

Crabier chevelu *Ardeola ralloides* tenant dans son bec la grenouille exotique *Rana greyii*, le seul amphibien sur l'île, Fisher's Valley, Sainte-Hélène, août 2012 (Steffen Oppel)



Figure 2. Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, in marshy grassland, Fisher's Valley, St. Helena, August 2012 (Steffen Oppel)

Crabier chevelu *Ardeola ralloides*, dans une prairie marécageuse, Fisher's Valley, Sainte-Hélène, août 2012 (Steffen Oppel)

grassland area, or flying low along the valley. Once it was found roosting in a small leafless tree in the evening.

Squacco Heron is widespread in Africa south of the Sahara, as well as being a common breeder in southern and eastern Europe, east to western Asia and the Middle East, and a vagrant further afield (Kushlan & Hancock 2005, Hockey *et al.* 2005). Two populations are recognised: a relatively sedentary or nomadic African population, and a migratory southern Palearctic-African one (BirdLife International 2013). It has been recorded on the Namibian coast, which is the nearest area of the African mainland to St. Helena, c.1,900 km distant (Hockey *et al.* 2005). However, the possibility exists that the bird was a Palearctic migrant overshoot. Squacco Heron is a vagrant to Ascension Island, the Cape Verdes, Madeira and the Azores, and a rare visitor to the Canaries (McCulloch 2004, Clarke 2008, Hazevoet 2012), while the species has also been recorded recently on the Brazilian island of Fernando de Noronha (Silva e Silva & Olmos 2006, Davis 2010).

This is the third vagrant heron species added to the St. Helena bird list in recent years, following Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* and Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii* (Beard 2012, Hillman & Clingham 2012). Other herons recorded on St. Helena are Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* (an almost annual visitor), Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* (at least six records) and Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (one record) (Rowlands *et al.* 1998, McCulloch 2004). All are postulated to have reached the island on south-east trade winds from a similar location on the African coast.

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